

Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and Christian Cabala

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I first learned about Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and Jewish and Christian interaction in the Renaissance period through Rabbi Dr. Byron L. Sherwin. A brief mention in class eventually led to a more extensive study on Christian interest in Judaism and the rise of a new era in Jewish-Christian dialogue in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.

In 1477, at the age of thirteen, Pico began his study of canon law in Bologna.¹ He also studied Latin and Greek. At the age of 23, he had written his masterpiece titled *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which included 900 theses on religion, philosophy, natural philosophy, and even magic.

His work reflected the wide-ranging education he was fortunate to receive. Plato and Aristotle, Islamic commentators such as Averroes and Avicenna, the Hermetic teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, Eastern thinkers such as Zoroaster and Melchior, and the oracles of the magi, were part of his learning.

Pico's philosophy included Platonism, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, Hermeticism, and other types of thought. The method he employed in understanding diverse ways of thinking was essentially syncretistic, which placed these philosophies in parallel.

Nevertheless, the most surprising aspect of Pico's system was the inclusion of Jewish mysticism, i.e., the *Kabbalah*.² Pico became the founder of Christian Kabbalah, or more appropriately, *Cabala*, to distinguish it from its normative Jewish counterpart.³ Normative

¹Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "Pico della Mirandola and the Cabala," Rosicrucian Digest Volume 90 Number 2 (2012): 35.

²See James D. Heiser, *Prisci Theologi and the Hermetic Reformation in the Fifteenth Century*, Malone: Repristination Press, 2011.

³*Perush 'Al ha-Torah*, a mystical commentary on the Torah, written by Menahem ben Benjaïm of Recanati was a major source of Pico's Kabbalistic understanding. Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 10.

Kabbalah refers to the mystical tradition that developed in Jewish circles. Christian Cabala drew from Jewish Kabbalah but was developed further by Christian models and concerns. Christian Cabala became an essential element of Western esotericism in the early modern period.⁴ Jewish mystical texts were undoubtedly known to many Christians primarily through the influx of Jewish converts to Christianity. Indeed, prominent Jewish converts to Christianity, such as Abner of Burgos and Pablo de Santa Maria, formerly Rabbi Solomon HaLevi, had credited Kabbalah with their decision to abandon Judaism and adopt the Christian faith.⁵

Nevertheless, Kabbalah, until the late 15th century, had primarily been used by Christians as a tool of conversion.⁶ It was used to bolster the Church's arguments in their endless quest to prove to Jews that Christianity was the true religion.⁷ What was revolutionary about Pico's interest in Jewish mysticism was his willingness to consider and endorse the notion that Kabbalah was an ancient form of wisdom in its own right that rightly belonged alongside other ancient repositories of knowledge such as Hermeticism or Pythagoreanism.

For Pico, an educated and enlightened individual could not avoid Kabbalah if they sincerely hoped to expand their understanding of God and Creation.⁸ The significance of this cannot be underestimated, as Ron Reissberg notes:

"One of the more fascinating aspects of the Italian Renaissance was the unprecedented level of intellectual intercourse between Jews and Christians. Partially, as a result of this attempt to find common roots of knowledge between Pagan theology, Greek philosophy, and Christian and Jewish doctrine, dialogue developed between Jewish and Christian intellectuals."⁹

However, it should be noted that Pico *did* believe that an accurate understanding of Kabbalah could be used to convince Jews of the truth of Christianity. Still, the very fact that a Jewish source of knowledge could be respected was a significant milestone in Christian understandings of Judaism.¹⁰ One goal of Pico's 900 Theses included in his *Oration on the*

⁴See Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 54.

⁵Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain: Volume 2* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 141.

⁶Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 15.

⁷Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 160.

⁸*Ibid.*, 175.

⁹Ron Reissberg, "Rabbi Leone da Modena, A Contextual Approach: Freedom and Determinism in Seventeenth-Century Jewish Thought," *Ex Post Facto*, Volume 2, Spring (1993):75.

¹⁰A. Robert Caponigri, trans., Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Chicago: Henry

Dignity of Man was the conversion of Jews through arguments that Jesus was the real secret of the Kabbalah.¹¹ Consequently, Christian Cabbalists used *gematria* to interpret Scripture by examining their numerical values to find sources for the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, etc.¹² Interestingly, several Jewish scholars have reviewed the influence on Jewish texts by Christian sources in recent decades.¹³

Pico based his general ideas primarily on Plato, as did Marsilio Ficino, his teacher.¹⁴ He nevertheless maintained a profound admiration for Aristotle. Pico attempted to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy since he believed they used different words to express the same fundamental concepts.¹⁵ Pico's interaction with Jewish texts was accomplished through Elia de Medigo and Johanan Alemanno. The Jewish convert to Christianity, Flavius Mithridates, i.e., Samuel ben Nissim ibn Faraj.¹⁶ Pico studied Hebrew and Arabic in Padua with Elia, and the latter also helped Pico understand Aramaic texts.

The study of Hebrew was controversial among some humanists of the Renaissance. The historian Leonardo Bruni Arentino had rejected the study of Hebrew as pointless. Bruni noted that neither St. Basil nor St. Augustine were accomplished students of Hebrew. Hostile towards the notion of learning a language from those he considered enemies.¹⁷ The concern that even simply studying Hebrew might have negative consequences for Christianity was summed up by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the central Christian figures of the Renaissance.¹⁸

Regnery Company, 1956), xii-xiii.

¹¹Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57. Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 162. 176.

¹²Ron Reissberg, "Rabbi Leone da Modena, A Contextual Approach: Freedom and Determinism in Seventeenth-Century Jewish Thought," *Ex Post Facto*, Volume 2, Spring (1993):75.

¹³For the interchange of Jewish and Christian ideas see Byron L. Sherwin, "Corpus Domini: Traces of the New Testament in East European Hasidim?" April 2007: *The Heythrop Journal* 35(3):267 – 280 and Arthur Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context," *AJS Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Apr., 2002):1-52. See also Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken Books. 1995.

¹⁴Marsilio Ficino circulated his translations of Plato from Greek into Latin. See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "Italian Renaissance Magic and Cabala," in *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33-40.

¹⁵Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 62.

¹⁶Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 10.

¹⁷Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 160.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 162. Erasmus' concern was also shared by German Professor Franz Joel when he claimed that "those

Pico, however, believed that an educated individual should also study Jewish sources and Hermetics because he thought they embodied the same concept of God through different words. Pico initiated a movement of Christian reconsideration of Jewish texts as legitimate sources of knowledge that were helpful to Christian understandings of faith.

Johannes Reuchlin, who eventually authored the famed work, *De Arte Cabalistica*, was Pico's student. Reuchlin studied with the great biblical commentator Rabbi Obadiah Sforno giving the former the most exposure to Jewish texts than any other Christian scholar in Germany.¹⁹ Reuchlin's involvement in Jewish religious life was significant as he eventually defended the Talmud against the Jewish convert Johannes (Josef) Pfefferkorn's attempts to have Jewish books banned.²⁰ Reuchlin's interest in Jewish mysticism also included respect for Jewish life and full participation in society. Reuchlin stated that Germans and Jews "Are fellow citizens of the same Roman Empire, and live on the basis of the same law of citizenship and internal peace."²¹

Pico's impact reached others, as well. The Augustinian friar Egidio da Viterbo, for example, was also an early Christian Cabalist, influenced by both Marsilio Ficino and Pico's Kabbalistic interpretations.²² Consequently, Pico's interest in Kabbalah spurred interest that spanned decades and eventually created the Christian Hebraist movement that continued for centuries.²³

The Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent diminished the popularity of Christian Cabala. The Catholic Church sought to standardize the parameters of acceptable doctrine to fight what it deemed heretical. Ideas that were considered to undermine the Church or potentially draw its members towards Protestantism were firmly rejected. The impact on the Jewish world was significant.

who study that language [Hebrew] become Jews." Ibid., 164.

¹⁹Reuchlin impacted other Christians Hebraists. The famed Sebastian Munster was his student. Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 182-183.

²⁰See Theodor Dunkelgrün, "Chapter 12 - The Christian Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe," in Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism Volume 7: The Early Modern World 1500-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 316-348.

²¹Reuchlin also defended the right of Jews to live in accordance with their understanding of Judaism. Reuchlin's Memorandum (*Rathschlag*) "Whether One is to Take the Books Away from the Jews, Eliminate, and Burn Them" cited in Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 188.

²²The degree to which interest in Jewish mysticism spread can be seen in the fact that even a leading Church official like Cardinal Egidio Casnisi da Viterbo (1465-1532) collected and studied Kabbalistic texts. He was even an author in the field of Jewish mysticism. Ibid., 176.

²³Salon Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650, Volume XIII* (New York: Columbia Press, 1969), 181.